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## THE BRASS CHECK,<sup>1</sup> A STUDY OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM: BY UPTON SINCLAIR<sup>2</sup>

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It might be helpful if some supernatural power could decree that the question "Why is the press biased?" could be asked only in the form "Why are people biased?" In *The Brass Check* Mr. Upton Sinclair has had his eye glued so firmly to the question in the first-quoted form that most of the implications of the second seem to have escaped him.

The cause of biased journalism, Mr. Sinclair tells us in effect, is corruption—capitalistic corruption. Consequently, the solution of the community's problem of insuring its main sources of information, the news channels, from contamination lies in taking the press from the corrupt capitalistic goats and giving it into the hands of the innocent public sheep. Since this is the underlying assumption on which the book's proposals are based, it is manifestly pertinent to examine it briefly before going farther into an analysis of the problem itself and the adequacy of Mr. Sinclair's conclusions.

Granting that existing news columns are "biased"—in other words, that they frequently reflect directly or indirectly the opinions, personal preferences, or interests of the reporter, editor, or publisher instead of being impartial surveys of the facts in an impersonal background—is the phenomenon to be explained solely, or even chiefly, in terms of corruption and immorality, or through something lying still deeper, of which these are only symptoms or perhaps surface excrescences? Let us examine *The Brass Check* itself for an answer.

The reviewer would be the last to ascribe corruption or even insincerity to Mr. Sinclair. Yet, *The Brass Check* affords an excellent example of "biased" reporting. The bias may be quite

<sup>1</sup> Published by the author, Pasadena, Cal., 1920. Pp. 443.

<sup>2</sup> The reader will find a stimulating discussion of many of the issues suggested in this article in Walter Lippmann's *Liberty and the News*, published by Harcourt, Brace and Howe, New York, 1920.

justifiable—that point is not being raised at the moment—it is none the less bias. To quote the author's own words in the Introduction, *The Brass Check* is to be a "book of facts."

The first half of this book tells a personal story. . . . If I were taking the witness stand in a court of justice, the jury would not ask for my general sentiments and philosophic opinions; they would not ask what other people had told me, or what was the common report . . . the thing they would wish to know—the only thing they would be allowed to know—is what I had personally seen and experienced. I take the oath of a witness. . . . In the second half of the book you will hear a host of other witnesses. . . . There are no mistakes in it, no guesses, no surmises . . . no inaccuracies. There are only facts.

In these words Mr. Sinclair obviously assumes for himself the function of a reporter, at least for the larger part of the book. Is his account, then, an impartial survey of the "facts" in an impersonal setting? Let the following quotations testify:

"There was a strike of the wage-slaves of the Beef Trust in Chicago." "All such things are lumped together by newspapers, which are good-naturedly tolerant of their fellow fakers" (p. 27). "How dignified and impressive! And how utterly and unspeakably knavish." "A man who spent his editorial time balancing like a tight-rope walker on the narrow thread of truth" (p. 29). "And now young Collier is dead, and the magazine to which for a time he gave his generous spirit has become an instrument of reaction pure and simple" (p. 30). "Also, no doubt, they were influenced by newspaper solidarity—a new kind of honor among thieves" (p. 54). "But alas for my hopes of fair play, my faith in the organ of arm-chair respectability!" (p. 174). "The 'kept' writers on the other side of the concrete wall" (p. 186).

Now these phrases—they are culled at random—may be quite justifiable in controversial writing, but they violate every canon of good reporting, inasmuch as the color they give the context is directly calculated to prejudice the reader with the writer's opinion. If we are to accept Mr. Sinclair's philosophy of the causes of bias, we must at once proceed to impute to him sordid or ignoble motives on an analysis of his own reporting. This inference is of course absurd. The truth is that he is so carried away with his own preconceptions that they inevitably color his

view of the facts. His preconceptions are simply different from those of the majority of news editors and writers.

Corruption has its share in contaminating news. The profit system undoubtedly lends its aid to the process. Corrupt publishers and servile editors and writers there undoubtedly are, just as there are corrupt and servile doctors, lawyers, politicians, and labor leaders, but the real difficulty lies in the tendency of men to think and act in terms of a bias of a largely unconscious character. It is made up of a whole set of preconceptions, evolved from heredity, family training, education, economic status, and interests—everything that constitutes social environment. The psychologists are just beginning to show us the complexities of the problem involved in estimating the relative influence of these various forces. In the light of their preconceptions men tend to test the “truth” or “falsehood” of the facts and relationships and “interpretations” which come into their experience. The dominant current bias is naturally capitalistic—which is not saying that it may not be quite sincere. When a man has a bias of a particularly crude form: when, for instance, he believes that the hope of salvation for humanity rests on the preservation of the existing social order unmodified, he is serving God and humanity if he helps to mold public opinion in that direction. To this common human weakness the publisher is no exception. He is simply in a position where his influence is more pronounced. This makes the publisher and the editor of great social importance, and the character of their “bias” of more than ordinary public interest—it does not condemn them offhand as corrupt.

The substitution of this hypothesis as to the chief cause of biased news for the “capitalistic corruption” theory cannot, however, be made a legitimate excuse for public self-gratulation. It may relieve our feelings, if we are inclined to be moralists, to substitute a wide band of gray for the sharp line of division between the black goats and the white sheep. Yet if we are really interested in securing more truthful and impartial news, and not in simply substituting a new bias for the old, our problem is immensely complicated by this much more baffling, if perhaps more tolerant, diagnosis of the underlying illness of journalism. For with its

acceptance the constructive possibilities of a "change in the system" alone lose much of their promise. Simply freeing well-intentioned people from "capitalistic domination" and giving them free rein in gathering their own news no longer meets the issue. They have, one and all, a bias of their own which will inevitably color their report of facts and relationships. Something more constructive than the mere removal of obstacles is obviously needed.

What is the real problem of journalism, and to what extent do the proposals in *The Brass Check* throw light on its solution?

The issue is not one of freedom of opinion. That is important, but not so important as that every citizen shall have as nearly as possible free access to all the important facts on which opinion is to be based. The modern community which is really in possession of the facts need not worry particularly about agitation of the wildest sort, whether it be extreme "radicalism" or extreme "reactionaryism." It may be—the reviewer believes it is—highly desirable that there be the utmost freedom of expression in editorial columns of all sorts, but unbiased news columns are of much greater concern because it is on the reliability of *information* that rationality of judgment must depend. What does this involve? There are, perhaps, two problems, interrelated and yet distinct: a problem of technique and a problem of control.

*The task of reporting and editing the news is a complex and highly organized business, demanding, if it is to be well done, not only intelligence and intuition, but a highly technical training and an enormously wide background of knowledge.* Without the capacity for scientific analysis and critical judgment, the best will in the world and the most sympathetic temperament will not make a journalist.

It may seem a simple thing to report the "facts." If it were only "facts" that demanded reporting, journalism might be an easy profession. But modern society is an infinitely complex thing, and to understand a labor dispute, a war in the Balkans, or even a baseball game, the public must have, respectively, not only the number of men out of work, the number of men under arms, or the score, but in each case the reasons behind these facts.

In other words, it must have the background, the relationships between them. For these relationships the reporter cannot depend on his observation alone. He must accept the evidence of others and, weighing it in the light of his own experience and knowledge, produce an "unbiased" account. Furthermore, he must produce it within a very limited number of hours. He is constantly racing the clock.

His problem would not be essentially different under any other organization of society. Inevitably his account will be prejudiced by his own outlook on life. All that can be hoped is that his knowledge will be wide enough and his professional standards high enough to do away with conscious bias and to reduce unconscious bias to the minimum.

If we happen to sympathize with Mr. Sinclair's dislike of the most prevalent existing form of bias, we will sympathize also with his trust in the "youthful" as against the older and more cynical reporter, but youth alone will not be a protection against biased news. It must be reinforced by knowledge and critical judgment. Granted that "youth" may be more courageous in standing out for its conception of the truth, and that courage is necessary, it cannot take the place of analytical ability. What the technical problem demands is higher professional standards—of capacity, training, and judgment. To secure these the community can do much to assist, partly, perhaps, by legislation (in demanding, for instance, a minimum educational requirement, as it does now in the case of medicine and law), but at least as effectively through various kinds of informal pressure. Public interference, however, will be fumbling and ineffective without guidance from the profession itself; it can help to furnish the impetus, but permanent improvement can be expected only through the development of a conscious professionalism on the part of the men who perform the technical service.

Despite numerous exceptions, it cannot be said that the quality of the great body of men who now report the news offers an encouraging outlook in this direction. In relation to its importance, the work is notoriously underpaid; its personnel is apt to be corre-

spondingly cheap; in so far as promising material enters it, it is usually with the idea of using it as an "experience" leading to something else; in short, it is *not* a profession.

To change this situation, a reporters' "union" (as suggested by Mr. Sinclair) might be a step in advance, but to realize its opportunities it would have to be far more than a device for raising wages, important and valuable as that would be in placing the task on a higher plane. The real opportunity for service for such an association would lie in its chance to promote the establishment of a real set of professional standards—of training, ideals, and ethics. In such an aim, difficult of attainment as it may seem under present conditions, lies the real hope of newspaperdom—the building up an ideal, not of propagating ideas for a new social order, but of professional service in disseminating the truth: leaving the members of the community free, that is, to form their own opinions and formulate their own policy.

It may be objected that all this is of no avail if the ultimate control of the press is still in the hands of owners whose main motive is personal profit. To a certain extent that may be true, and yet the development of professional standards has its bearing here as well. To see how, let us see what this problem of "control" is.

The problem as we know it arises through the size and complexity of the enterprise, the extent of the organization, the size of plant and equipment required—in a word, the amount of capital needed. Profits are derived from the advertising, not the sale of news. Publishing a newspaper becomes a "business" and not a "profession": the controlling owner may not himself be a professional journalist; whether he is or not, his controlling motive may be profit rather than professional service. As a result we may get the "corrupting influence of the market," the pressure of advertisers, personal corruption. So stated, the problem of social control of the press assumes the same form as that which the public faces in every major industry today—and seemingly it furnishes the same dilemma: a highly specialized business too technical for the layman to understand or follow through all its

phases and yet too vital to permit the consumer to allow it to go wholly unsupervised. The consumer lacks, and must necessarily lack, the expert knowledge to interfere successfully in detail; if he fails to interfere at all he lays himself open, apparently, to the machinations of Mr. Sinclair's "scarlet woman."

Let us now look at Mr. Sinclair's proposals. His remedy is to abolish the profit system and turn the press over to the "workers of hand and brain." What do these proposals mean as concretely applied? He suggests a municipally owned and controlled press. Is there any reason to suppose that a government in power would not have just as many special interests to promote—for the sake of staying in—as any private owner? or that it would hesitate any more to color, kill, or manipulate news stories to promote that interest? Neither the character of our municipal governments nor the record during the war of any national government in the world would give weight to such an assumption. The intelligent Chicagoan may have his doubts of the character of the news dispensed by the *Tribune* and the *Herald-Examiner*: would he have any doubt at all of news controlled by the city hall?

Mr. Sinclair suggests depending on organized labor for protecting the news (we shall not stop here to ask whether there is such a thing as a common interest among the "workers of hand and brain"). Granting—and the reviewer would be the last to deny—that the labor movement has a long bill of legitimate damages against the existing press for falsification of the news, have the experiments in starting "labor" papers given rise to any hope that the *news* columns thus controlled have done more than substitute one bias for another? However useful and necessary they may have been as counter-propaganda against "colored" news in the "capitalist" press, they have shown, from the *London Herald* to the *New York Call*, a thoroughly "capitalistic" capacity for not only emphasizing news favorable to labor, for biased "interpretations," but for actually misrepresenting the facts.

A press "subsidized" by private individuals or by government has been suggested as a means of getting away from control by advertisers. Without minimizing the evil aimed at, it might be pointed out that the French press (not to speak of an earlier type

of newspaper in English-speaking countries) is an excellent example of journalism supported by subsidy instead of by profit from advertisement, and there are few intelligent Americans familiar with both the American and the French press who would care to exchange. A subsidized paper may be a very fine example of high-class journalism; there are existing cases—but the result depends on the ideals and judgment of the person doing the subsidizing. On the other hand, one of the finest journals in the world, the *Manchesier Guardian*, is organized on a straight-out business basis.

*Granted an adequate standard of professional journalism—a body of highly trained men competent to weigh news in terms of social significance and to present it adequately—the problem of control becomes one of turning the control over to them.* This does not mean that they ever would or should be free from public examination and pressure in the performance of their task, any more than the medical profession, for instance, is now. But the daily decisions have to be made in the light of professional knowledge available only to the technically trained man, and it is on his training and his self-control that the public must finally rely for the effective administration of the business of news gathering and distributing. It may be quite true that the dispensing of news is a public utility, and so legitimately subject to public control, but that merely states the problem, it does not solve it.

The discussion so far has perhaps tended to emphasize the work of the reporter as the main technical task involved in the problem. It is, of course, in some respects less important than that of the editor. It is the editor or—on a large metropolitan daily—a whole group of editors, who give the news its emphasis. Personally or by proxy, the managing editor decides daily, out of the mass of reports from the ends of the earth—how much space, and what emphasis (as to position, headline, etc.) shall be given a particular dispatch. The total amount of space is limited and at best it is a difficult problem of judgment which "story" is the most important. It is easy, in any given instance, to charge that a dispatch is omitted, mutilated, or given the wrong emphasis as a result of bribery or corrupt pressure on the editor. The charge

may be quite true in some—it may be in many—instances. It seems much more reasonable to assume that in the great majority of cases the editor's choice of emphasis is a result of a more or less unconscious bias which may be no more "immoral" than that of any other citizen, including possibly Mr. Sinclair. It may be a crassly stupid bias, and it may result in very serious social damage, but the remedy, mainly, is more knowledge, and not simply a change in bias.

It is almost inevitable that a task which involves so rapid a series of important and puzzling decisions as does that of the managing editor should develop a routine of its own—that the editor's mind should become in some sense a set of pigeonholes, whose character is determined by his mental outlook, into which news is nightly shuffled with its appropriate headings. If the outlook is narrow, the news is warped accordingly. This primary difficulty is only aggravated by the interference of the owner and of a range of private interests with the editor's original judgment. A real professional association, if such a thing is possible, would hit both evils at once, both improving and protecting the standard of the editor's judgment.

This is a long-distance remedy—the creation of real professional standards—but it is difficult to see how short of it there is any real solution. The adoption of a radically different kind of social and economic organization might hasten it—who knows?—but the mere change would not solve it.

One hears Mr. Sinclair objecting, perhaps, "I have expressed a wish that we could have a municipally owned press which would work. You have expressed a wish that we could have a professionally motivated press which would work. If my wish is futile, yours is no less so." To this criticism there are two answers. First, if the arguments in this paper have any validity at all, they should have demonstrated that without a journalistic personnel, properly trained and motivated, to which the community can intrust the decision on news, any change in control will be simply a substitute of a new bias for the old. Second, which is more nearly in line with the tendency of American social forces and best calculated to take advantage of the influences most favorable

to the aim in view—an impartial news system? Space forbids any adequate analysis of this issue. Two questions will have to suffice for argument. Is there any evidence whatever that the American community in the national, state, or municipal field has sufficiently worked out the problems of public administration to be prepared to handle adequately and efficiently the complex problems suggested in the preceding brief outline? On the basis of the vote in the recent national election, is there any indication that public sympathy and support would attend any comprehensive effort to meet the problem in the directions suggested in *The Brass Check*—assuming that any considerable group in either the municipality or in the labor movement had a concrete program for so meeting it, which is not the case? On the other hand, is there any reason to believe that the public would not welcome and, if they understood, would not aid, an effort on the part of the journalistic profession to solve its own difficulties? Frankly, as a pure personal opinion, the reviewer believes that it would.

What would be involved in the program suggested by the foregoing discussion? Its general character is perhaps already clear, and its details would have to be worked out gradually in practice, but a brief, concrete outline in summary might be pertinent.

First, as to the community's part: there seems no sufficient reason why minimum educational requirements should not be demanded of journalists as of other professional specialists. As the development of professional standards progressively justified confidence, their administration might be gradually turned over more and more completely to the profession itself, as in the case of medicine and law, where the professional associations really exercise the authority in the name of the community, although constantly subject to public criticism and pressure. Breadth of knowledge and training really lie at the heart of the whole problem. There are, however, certain negative restrictions which the community might safely make in problems where its interests are manifestly not properly safeguarded at present, and where the dangers are quite clear and definite. Two or three illustrations should suffice; all of them are presented in *The Brass Check*. Personal reputations need more protection than is at present

afforded by the laws of libel. Second, the reader is in a better position to gauge the reliability of news if he is sure of its source—if he knows, for instance, that a dispatch dated “Warsaw” really comes from Warsaw, and from what agency—special correspondent, government bureau, private propagandist, or news agency. No such test of “bias” is possible in most instances today. Finally, the correspondent on the spot, especially the foreign correspondent, is in a much better position than the editor to give the right emphasis to a story. It is a simple matter today for the “bias” of editor or publisher, through headlines or blue-pencil, to change its whole effect on the reader. To the editor, none the less, in the very nature of the case, must be left the decision as to the amount of space to be accorded the material and its position in the make-up. These things are common knowledge, and these and others would probably not be impossible of remedy by regulation of one sort or another, well thought out. A general public discussion of the problems would in itself be helpful.

These steps could not hinder, they should promote, the assumption of a more conscious and intelligent leadership on the part of the better elements in the profession itself. Whether the time is yet ripe for the ideal suggested in the discussion of the technical aspects of journalism—the formation of a professional association of the editorial and reportorial staffs combined to bring about a gradual rise in professional standards of ethics—the reviewer does not pretend to say. The difficulties are great. Chief among them, perhaps, is the fact that the members of the profession as a whole who would understand the aim are probably now in the minority, and that the success of the project would depend on the gradual elimination of much of the existing personnel material and its replacement with new and different blood. It can be achieved, undoubtedly, only by a succession of tentative and partial starts in individual communities. Whether the “reporters’ unions” and “newspapermen’s associations” which have been started here and there offer hopeful promise, again the reviewer has no adequate opinion. The development of professional *mores* takes time, but the mere fact that the problem is beginning to be discussed is at least suggestive.

Whether journalistic "professionalism" presents dangers of its own—whether the genus newspaperman has a peculiar bias to be guarded against—who knows? It will probably be a long time before he fails to place the value of a "scoop" or "beat"—an exclusive story—far beyond the estimate the community puts upon it. Does he inevitably tend to become "sensational"? The answer depends partly on the education of the public, partly on the character of his own education and professional environment. There is no reason to assume that the "truth" must necessarily be uninteresting and dull, although the community today would probably be willing to accept rather more dulness than it is forced to.

This much, however, seems inevitable: that as community life becomes ever more complex, the journalist must more and more tend to specialize in particular fields. He must more and more become an expert in particular fields where his own knowledge best qualifies him to appreciate the bearing of the facts and to report them adequately. To the future must be left the problem of reconciling expert analysis with "interest." This issue is already here; leaving affairs *in statu quo* does not remove it—witness the growth of special newspaper "departments," finance, sports, and the rest.

One word in conclusion: *The Brass Check* lays on corruption and the profit system the responsibility for the hideous picture it paints. To change it, the author would abolish the profit system. Without claiming any particular virtue for a profit-motivated society, and without attempting to minimize the number of instances in which the profit motive has subordinated or even wiped out the professional motive, the reviewer has suggested that the emphasis of the book is wrong and the "reform" proposed inadequate. The essence of the alternative here proposed is the gradual building up—through the utilization of many and various social forces—of a real journalistic professionalism. As that became a real power, the problem of "control" would become progressively less pressing. As a further suggestion, however, this might be pertinent: men enter the publishing business today, as

they enter other businesses, on the "trial and error" basis, and with no preliminary qualifications other than the possession or control of enough capital to start. Will the community of the future, in its fumbling efforts to solve the general problem of social control, decide that in the ownership as well as in the administration of journalistic enterprises it is wise to demand at least minimum standards of fitness?

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